

Up Pompeii (4): The House of the Faun

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The 'House of the Faun' is one of the grandest properties in Pompeii. Its sheer scale is impressive, taking up as it does a whole town-block (or *insula*), an area roughly equivalent to the length of a hockey pitch and half its width. Its size is comparable not so much with private houses in other towns as with royal palaces belonging to Hellenistic kings in the Greek East, or with luxury aristocratic villas on the Bay of Naples. Its grandiose dimensions would have been all the more apparent next to the other nearby properties, which only take up an eighth of a town-block or less.

The house was not always so spacious, but had developed from relatively humble origins. During the third century B.C., the house covered only the central part of the block, and included a kitchen garden. A century later, the house grew to its current dimensions, and this functional garden gave way to a luxurious peristyle – an ornamental garden-courtyard surrounded by columns. It was during this period that Pompeii as a whole was becoming increasingly prosperous, probably by exporting local agricultural products such as wine and olive oil to the West and East alike. The town invested some of its wealth in impressive new public buildings, such as the theatre and the basilica, and it updated the Stabian Baths with all the latest mod. cons, including central heating (via a 'hypocaust,' a system of under-floor passages allowing hot air to circulate). At roughly the same time, the owner of the 'House of the Faun' was also reaping financial rewards, which he chose to display in his house, not only by massively increasing its size, but also by installing beautiful multi-coloured mosaic pavings and by adding architectural decorations. Two-thirds of the ground-floor area of the enlarged property was devoted to spaces for receiving guests, an indication of the owner's desire to impress his contemporaries.

What we see when visiting the house today is essentially its layout in this second-century B.C. phase, but largely stripped of its mosaics, which are now on display in Naples Museum. In front of the main entrance, the visitor reads the word *HAVE* ('welcome') on the paving. We are left in no doubt as to the grandeur of this property right from its façade onto the street. Its doorway is decorated with two columns on each side, complete with Corinthian capitals. On entering the vestibule, up above our heads are multi-coloured shrines of stucco, 2.5 m. high, which dominate the narrow space, and beneath our feet is a flooring composed of triangles of coloured marble. From here we, like visitors over 2,000 years ago, can enjoy a view right through the house, from the main reception room, or *atrium*, into first one, and then another, even grander, peristyle garden. A mosaic with two tragic theatrical masks, accompanied by festoons of flowers and fruit, once marked the threshold to the *atrium*, the first in a series of lavish multi-coloured mosaic floorings. On entering the *atrium* itself, we see the pool, or *impluvium*, with its multi-coloured lozenge-shaped flooring glinting up through the water, with the famous bronze statuette of the dancing faun in its centre. In fact, though, this statuette was originally displayed on a pedestal on the far side of the pool.

From the *atrium*, we can either wander through the other reception areas or turn to explore the more functional areas of the house, starting off from a second *atrium*. Most Pompeian houses contain only a single *atrium*. In this house, a smaller *atrium* appears to have been used as a storage area: cupboards,

pottery transport containers (*amphorae*), and two strong-boxes were found here. It opens into a corridor, leading to a stable, baths, and a kitchen.

What's in a name?

The name by which it is now known, the 'House of the Faun', is purely a modern convention (a rather more memorable label than VI.xii.2, its number on the site-plan). Since its excavation in 1830-32, the house has also been known by several other names, reflecting changing perceptions of the house. One of the earliest was the 'House of Goethe', reflecting a common practice in Pompeii of naming a property in honour of a distinguished visitor present at its excavation. This name was chosen by Wilhelm Zahn, who visited the site on the 7th October 1830, shortly after excavation of the house had begun, and who produced a lavishly illustrated work entitled (equally lavishly) *The most beautiful ornaments and most noteworthy paintings from Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Stabiae after original drawings made on the site*. He had visited the house with Baron August von Goethe, son of the great German poet (himself also a Pompeian enthusiast), who died in Rome of smallpox a few days later.

Following the discovery of the spectacular 'Alexander mosaic' on 24th October 1831, the house became known as the 'House of the Large Mosaic'. This name, in turn, was replaced by the 'House of the Battle of Alexander', as it became clear that the mosaic depicted a battle between Alexander the Great and the Persian King Darius III, capturing the moment of panic as Darius turned to flee in his chariot. The mosaic was probably regarded as a masterpiece in its own day, as well as in modern times, and may well be a copy of a famous painting. It quickly became one of the highlights of a visit to Pompeii: after visiting in 1835, the French novelist Alexandre Dumas (author of *The Three Musketeers*, and *The Man in the Iron Mask*) devoted two chapters in his travel journal to the house and this mosaic. Measuring 5.82 x 3.13 m., it contains over one and a half million tiny coloured cubes or tesserae, and contains poignant details such as a dying man's face reflected in a shield. It was located in a prominent position, on the axis of house, viewable from peristyles on either side.

Following the publication of Lord Bulwer-Lytton's popular novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* in 1834, yet another name was invented – the 'House of Arbaces the Egyptian', after one of the novel's central characters, a villainous Egyptian priest of Isis. This reflected the Egyptian theme of other mosaics in the house, such as a Nile scene, complete with crocodile, hippopotamus, and ibis, and another showing ducks among lotus plants.

One final name (although there are others) is the 'House of the Lucretii Satrii', after the supposed occupants of the house. The Lucretii Satrii are known from inscriptions to be one of the old established families of Pompeii, and the idea has recently been floated that the house retained traditional features, such as old-style wall paintings, in order to reflect the family's pride in its historical heritage. Graffiti in Oscan, the pre-Roman language used in Pompeii, including eight partially preserved alphabets, various random words, and a personal name, were discovered

on the outside walls of the property: a coincidence or by design? Inside, the discovery in the main *atrium* of a small altar to the goddess Flora, also inscribed in Oscan, suggests that whoever was living in this house at the time of the eruption may indeed have belonged to one of Pompeii's old-established families. That this family was the Satrii is an idea derived from the bronze statuette. Commonly called the 'faun', it could equally well be a satyr, with the result that this statuette may have been intended to present visitors entering the house with a visual pun on the family's name.

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For more on the House of the Faun, try:

<http://www.pompeii.co.uk/cd/faun/0.htm>

For the original Up Pompeii, try:

<http://www.beebfun.com/up.htm>